

The Role of Attribution Processes in Conformity and Dissent

Revisiting the Asch Situation

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Beliefs about the nature and strength of social conformity processes have been profoundly influenced by the demonstrations of Solomon Asch (1951, 1955, 1956). The earliest of social philosophers had noted the reluctance of the individual to stand alone against the group, but the specifics of Asch's demonstrations nevertheless were surprising and even alarming. Perhaps the most provocative feature of these demonstrations was the type of judgments that proved susceptible to social influence. Asch's subjects were given a simple perceptual task involving comparisons among lines of varying lengths; the correct response on each trial was a matter of "objective reality" and was unmistakable to the subject. Nevertheless, confronted with the unanimous, but incorrect, public judgment of his peers and required to call out his own answer, the subject became uncertain and uncomfortable. In fact, faced with this conflict between the evidence of his senses and the consensus of his peers, many subjects chose the path of public conformity. It would have seemed remarkable for even the most cohesive group of friends or co-workers to so control the feelings and behavior of its members. But the composition of Asch's groups made the demonstrations all the more dramatic and unexpected, for these groups consisted of strangers with no special claim to the subject's loyalty or affection. They offered neither the promise of future favor and advancement nor the threat of continuing ostracism or punishment.

Social psychologists did not miss the most obvious implication of these studies: If even moderate

rates of conformity could be obtained in the Asch situation, then much greater conformity could be obtained in more conducive settings. Indeed, researchers in the emerging area of group dynamics were quick to demonstrate that conformity could be heightened through the introduction of difficult, complex, or subjective judgments (Asch, 1951; Coleman, Blake, & Mouton, 1958; Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; Tuddenham & MacBride, 1959). Further increases in conformity were accomplished through manipulations of group attractiveness (Back, 1951; Gerard, 1954; Jackson & Salzstein, 1958) and through other procedures designed to enhance the group's cohesiveness or sense of interdependence (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; Jones, Wells, & Torrey, 1958; Thibaut & Strickland, 1956).

These studies and others that followed did much to explicate the process by which groups achieve and maintain uniformity, but they may have detracted from a full understanding and appreciation of the original Asch demonstrations. From the popular perspectives of social comparison theory and group dynamics, it was easy to view the Asch situation as a weak and unpromising source of conformity pressures—a sort of baseline against which more potent conformity paradigms could be evaluated. The present article, however, reexamines the Asch situation from a rather different perspective, one that emphasizes the role of interpersonal perception and attribution. From this perspective, it may be possible to appreciate anew the compelling conformity pressures created by the Asch situation and to launch a more general exploration of those social perception processes that may liberate or may inhibit society's potential dissenters. The conceptual analysis and discussion that follow owe an obvious debt both to earlier considerations of

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the Asch subject's phenomenology (Asch, 1951, 1955, 1956; Jones & Gerard, 1967, pp. 387-391; Tuddenham & MacBride, 1959) and to more formal contributions in attribution and self-perception theory (Alexander & Knight, 1971; Alexander & Sagutun, 1973; Bem, 1972; Heider, 1958; Jones & Davis, 1965; Jones, Kanouse, Kelley, Nisbett, Valins, & Weiner, 1973; Kelley, 1967).

Consider first the attribution problems that confronted the Asch subject as he contemplated the responses of his peers on a "critical" trial. Unless he deduced the nature of the "conspiracy" against him, he would be baffled—unable either to detect situational forces or to postulate plausible dispositional differences that might account for his peers' apparently erroneous but unanimous judgments. To the subject, the correct judgment appeared so obvious that only perceptual incompetents, fools, or madmen could err. He furthermore had every reason to assume that the right answer appeared equally obvious to his peers. Accordingly, by dissenting, he ran the risk of appearing incompetent, foolish, or even mad; at best his dissent promised to be as incomprehensible to his peers as their current judgments were to him. His dissent, in fact, represented a challenge to *their* competence, wisdom, and sanity—a challenge one is loath to offer, particularly when one's own ability to make sense of one's world seems suddenly in question.

The potential risks of dissent for the Asch subject thus were far greater than the loss of the group's approval or the possibility of appearing less insightful or knowledgeable than one's peers. Disagreements about politics, films, or restaurants may raise questions about one's values, intellect, or sophistication; but in contrast to the Asch situation, they do not challenge one's ability to judge the concrete and unambiguous features of one's environment. The accuracy of one's perceptions may occasionally be called into question by experiences with natural or contrived optical illusions; few among us, however, have ever faced disagreement from a group of our peers on such matters of objective reality.

While many researchers, of course, have attempted to describe the Asch subject's conflict, none since Asch (1956, pp. 66-68) has emphasized sufficiently the uniqueness and difficulty of the subject's dilemma. To appreciate further the nature of this dilemma, let us imagine an introductory lecture in psychology: The instructor is describing the Asch study and has just shown a picture of the experimental stimuli. Suddenly he is interrupted

by a student who remarks, "But line A *is* the correct answer, just as the confederate said." Predictably, the class would laugh aloud and thereby communicate their enjoyment of their peer's joke. Suppose, however, that the dissenter failed to smile or to otherwise confirm that he was trying to be funny. Suppose, instead, that he insisted, "Why are you all laughing at me? I can see perfectly, and line A *is* correct." Once convinced of the dissenter's sincerity, the class response almost certainly would be a mixture of discomfort, bewilderment, concern, and doubt about the dissenter's mental and perceptual competence. It is *this* response that the Asch dissenters risked and, accordingly, it is not surprising that many chose to avoid it through conformity, even though the private costs of such conformity may have been considerable.

In some respects the Asch subject's "attribution crisis" was unique. But attribution problems similar in kind, if not in magnitude, are involved whenever the potential dissenter must confront the expressed sentiments of his peers. The dissenter is faced consistently with the following pair of interrelated problems: (a) Why are my peers expressing judgments that differ from my own and apparently are incorrect; that is, to what may I attribute their behavior? and (b) What would my dissent imply about me and my perception of my peers; that is, to what would they attribute *my* behavior? The subject's success in dealing with the first of these questions should influence his private judgment and feeling of confidence in that judgment as well as his public response. His answer to the second question should have impact primarily on his overt behavior, although as Bem (1965, 1967, 1972) has emphasized, inferences about one's private beliefs or perceptions may follow in large measure from observation of one's overt behavior.

In most everyday circumstances, the dissenter can resolve both of these attribution questions with little difficulty or trepidation by identifying differences between those external forces that face him and those that influence his antagonists. Typically, these differences may be conceived of as differences in potential payoffs that produce corresponding biases in public expression of belief and often in private perceptions as well. Consider the defense lawyer who opposes capital punishment while faced with a group of police officers or prosecuting attorneys who support it, the general who disagrees with politicians or admirals, the univer-

sity administrator who dissents from the views of faculty or alumni; or the industrialist who is opposed by environmentalists or union members. In each case the relevant differences in potential payoffs are obvious to the dissenter, and he can readily identify a "reference group" that, faced with similar external forces and payoffs, shares or would be likely to share his views. He may furthermore assume that the relevant pressures and payoffs are equally obvious to the majority from whom he dissents. He thus understands the biases that affect their judgments and has little doubt or fear concerning their interpretation of his dissent. As a result, the conformity pressures he faces are greatly reduced, and all other factors being equal, he is likely to dissent.

A second type of confrontation pits the dissenter against peers who seem subject to the same external forces and potential payoffs as he. Here the resolution of attribution problems must be more subtle and probably will be less satisfactory to the dissenter; it involves not the recognition of obvious differences in potential payoffs but the postulation of more subtle differences in the interpretation and evaluation of payoffs. In such cases the dissenter must attribute different personal dispositions to others and may not use a purely "situational" attribution involving clear-cut payoff differences. Of course, such a resort to dispositional rather than situational explanations for dissent will be most unsatisfactory to the individual, to the extent that evidence of shared values and experience exists. Consider, for instance, a black parent whose private opinion concerning the cross-town busing of school children is challenged by the expressed views of his neighbors—black men and women who have been subject to the same social forces as he and who seem generally to share his values and goals. The dissenter will be forced to postulate a difference in the weights or *priorities* given by him and by his neighbors to such shared objectives as racial integration, neighborhood control of schools, superior facilities, and convenience. In such confrontations the dissenter probably will be uncomfortable and may be apt to question the wisdom of his judgment (at least until the difference in priorities can be verified and made explicit, and until support for his position can be obtained from those who share his priorities). Nevertheless, the attribution crisis he faces is capable of more or less satisfactory resolution, and as a result, conformity pressures are held in check.

The Asch situation offers a sharp contrast to these common confrontations. It is representative of situations in which the dissenter can neither find adequate explanation for the differences in judgment that have arisen nor anticipate any satisfactory interpretation that his peers could place on his dissent. In fact, it offers the most extreme type of attribution crisis for the dissenter because it entails absolutely no external forces or payoffs and no conceivable priorities that could differ and thereby account for disagreements. In such perplexing circumstances the assault on the potential dissenter's judgment reaches an intensity virtually unparalleled outside the laboratory.

The experiment reported in the present article attempted, through the introduction of appropriate payoff matrices, to capture the attributional characteristics of the three types of dissent situations that have been discussed. Thus, in one experimental condition the matrices permitted disagreement and dissent to be attributed to obvious differences between those potential payoffs governing the judgments of the dissenter and those governing the judgments of his peers. A second condition introduced matrices that offered identical payoffs for the potential dissenter and for his peers but that nevertheless permitted the postulation of differences in priorities which could account for differences in judgment. A third condition was designed to recreate the essential features of the Asch situation; thus the payoff matrices presented in this condition were such that they suggested no conceivable explanation for dissent.

The basic hypothesis that underlies predictions about these experimental conditions should be clear from the interpretation and analysis that have preceded. It is hypothesized that pressures to conformity are reduced, and a potential dissenter's confidence in his judgments is increased, to the extent that he can both account for the relevant disagreement and anticipate a satisfactory interpretation of it by his peers. Specifically, it is predicted (a) that the condition offering a conceptual replication of the Asch situation should permit less dissent and less confidence among dissenters than the two experimental conditions that suggested potential explanations for dissent and, more specifically, (b) that the frequency of dissent and the confidence of dissenters should be least in the "Asch condition," intermediate in the condition where differences in priorities of raters must be postulated to account for dissent, and greatest in the

condition where dissent can be attributed to corresponding differences in potential payoffs.

Method

OVERVIEW

Participants listened to 24 pairs of tones and after each pair judged which tone was longer in duration. In a control condition subjects simply wrote private judgments after hearing each pair of tones. In the three experimental conditions the subject called out his judgment only after hearing the responses of three confederates of the experimenter. On 17 of the trials the confederates made accurate judgments, but on 7 trials they unanimously guessed Tone 2 when, in fact, the first of the tones presented was considerably longer. On these 7 "critical" trials the subject's response could, therefore, be scored as an instance of either conformity or dissent.

An attribution manipulation was provided in the three experimental conditions through the introduction of payoff matrices. In the Asch condition the same simple matrices applied on critical trials as on noncritical trials, so that these matrices offered no potential explanation for disagreement or dissent. In the other two conditions the confederates' errors were perfectly associated with, and hence could be attributed to, the introduction of asymmetric payoffs on critical trials. In one condition the same asymmetric payoffs that favored the confederates' incorrect guess also applied for the subject; thus dissent could be explained adequately only by postulating that the subject and confederates had given different priority or weight to the asymmetry of payoffs. In the remaining experimental condition the asymmetric payoffs on critical trials applied only for the confederates, but not for the subject; thus disagreement or dissent could readily be attributed to corresponding differences in potential payoffs.

At the conclusion of the final stimulus presentation, subjects in all four conditions rated their confidence in the judgments they had made.

SUBJECTS, CONFEDERATES, AND EXPERIMENTERS

A total of 80 male and 80 female undergraduates served as experimental subjects. A dozen of their peers were recruited as paid confederates, each participating in several sessions in each experimental condition (although it was not feasible to use a formal factorial design in controlling for possible effects of particular confederates). The experimental subjects were first-year students not enrolled in the introductory psychology class; they were recruited by telephone after they had responded to a mailed invitation to join the psychology department's "pool" of paid subjects. This choice of subjects, coupled with the particular experimental procedures followed, apparently was a sufficient precaution to eliminate potential problems of suspicion and familiarity with the Asch paradigm. During the initial open-ended phase of debriefing, no subject expressed any suspicion that confederates had been employed and none made any reference to the classic Asch phenomenon. During subsequent debriefing, six subjects did claim to recognize a detailed description of the original Asch procedure, but none claimed to have previously associated it with their own conformity traits.

Two experimenters, one male and one female, each ran half of the male subjects and half of the female subjects in each experimental condition. However, no main effects

TABLE 1

Stimulus Durations for Critical Trials

Trial no.	Tone 1 duration ^a	Tone 2 duration ^a	Tone 1-Tone 2	Tone 1-Tone 2
				Tone 2
4	3.0	2.1	.9	.42
8	4.6	3.0	1.6	.53
10	5.2	3.6	1.6	.44
14	3.2	1.9	1.3	.68
18	4.7	2.7	2.0	.74
20	5.2	3.4	1.8	.53
22	1.5	.8	.7	.88

^a In seconds.

or interactions involving sex of subject or experimenter were ultimately detected in statistical analyses; accordingly, these variables are ignored in subsequent presentations and discussions of data.

EXPERIMENTAL STIMULI

The 24 stimulus pairs presented to subjects in the judgment task were prerecorded tones of varying duration and frequency that originally had been generated by an audio oscillator. Preliminary testing had been undertaken to select durations that were readily distinguishable yet able to produce conformity rates approximating the 36% rate reported by Asch (1955).

The tones presented on the seven critical conformity trials on which confederates deliberately erred in their judgments varied in duration from .8 to 5.2 seconds with a difference between tones ranging from .7 to 2.0 seconds (see Table 1). Similar stimulus pairs were also presented on "noncritical" trials for which confederates called out correct judgments. On noncritical trials the longer tone was presented first two thirds of the time.

INITIAL PROCEDURES FOR ALL

EXPERIMENTAL CONDITIONS

Before the session began, confederates and subjects conversed for several minutes outside the experimental room. The confederates gave no hint that they were acquainted with each other or that they knew anything about the experiment.

The laboratory into which participants were led by the experimenter contained four adjacent cubicles with a chair placed in front of each cubicle. The confederates quickly sat in the three chairs to the experimenter's left, leaving the fourth for the subject. The experimenter first thanked the participants for volunteering and then proceeded to explain that he was pretesting stimuli for a perception experiment that would involve judgments about the relative lengths of tones made under various circumstances (e.g., with or without distraction and with various incentives for correct judgments). He remarked that the "formal" perception experiment would use the soundproof cubicles behind the subjects' chairs but that the cubicles had not yet been wired and were unnecessary for the informal pretesting to follow.

The experimenter's instructions for the discrimination task followed: "There will be a series of trials in which you will hear two tones. Your job is to say after each trial which tone was longer. Since we're doing this in-

formally, you can just call out your answer after each trial."

At this point the experimenter paused for questions and one confederate asked, "Does it matter who goes first?" The experimenter replied that it would be easiest to record responses if the participants called out their answers in the order of their seating. With an accompanying gesture, he ensured that the subject's answers would always follow those of the three confederates.

ATTRIBUTION MANIPULATION

The next set of instructions described the payoff matrices that would apply on critical and noncritical trials in the three experimental conditions (and would thereby vary potential attribution sources). These matrices were illustrated on large cardboards that remained visible throughout the study. The experimenter specifically referred to these visual aids during his initial descriptions and in his subsequent attempts to clarify the relevant payoff structure facing each participant on each trial.

Asch condition. The experimenter explained that for each trial each of the four participants would receive 10 points for correctly guessing that Tone 1 was longer, 10 points for correctly guessing that Tone 2 was longer, but 0 points for any incorrect response. This symmetric matrix is illustrated in Table 2a.

Differing priorities. The experimenter stated that on most trials the participants would receive 10 points for any correct response (Table 2a), but that on several "special" trials 100 points would be awarded to anyone guessing that Tone 2 was longer while only the standard 10 points would be awarded for correctly guessing that Tone 1 was longer (Table 2b). He emphasized that incorrect responses would always receive 0 points and then concluded with the promise that on each trial he would indicate clearly whether the standard (symmetric) or special (asymmetric) matrix applied.

Differing payoffs. The experimenter first described the symmetric matrix (Table 2a) and indicated that it would apply for all four participants on "most trials." He next introduced the asymmetric matrix (Table 2b) and explained that it would apply only on some "special trials" and "only for certain subjects," a feature of the procedure that he justified by claiming an interest in "having differing people working on the same judgment task for different rewards." The experimenter then stated simply that on the special trials the asymmetric matrix would apply for Subjects 1,

TABLE 3

Association of Symmetric and Asymmetric Matrices with Critical and Noncritical Trials for Subject and Confederates

Trial	Condition		
	Asch	Differing priorities	Differing payoffs
Critical			
Subject	Symmetric	Asymmetric	Symmetric
Confederates	Symmetric	Asymmetric	Asymmetric
Noncritical			
Subject	Symmetric	Symmetric ^a	Symmetric ^a
Confederates	Symmetric	Symmetric ^a	Symmetric ^a

^a Note the Trial 16 exception (see Footnote 1 in text).

2, and 3 (i.e., the confederates) but not for Subject 4 (i.e., the lone naive subject). Subject 4, it was emphasized, would always be awarded points according to the standard symmetric matrix. These instructions ended with the experimenter's assurance that on each trial he would use the available visual aids to make clear which payoffs applied for the various participants.

All conditions. The participants then heard the 24 pairs of tones. After each pair the three confederates and then the subject individually called out their responses as the experimenter displayed the relevant payoffs. Trials 4, 8, 10, 14, 18, 20, and 22 were the critical trials in which confederates in all experimental conditions incorrectly guessed that Tone 2 was longer; on the other 17 trials the confederates guessed correctly.

Table 3 indicates the association between critical trials and the presentation of symmetric or asymmetric matrices. It is this association that constituted the attribution manipulation in the experiment. In the Asch condition the symmetric payoffs that applied for all subjects on all trials could not conceivably account for instances of disagreement or dissent on critical trials; accordingly, the essential feature of the Asch situation was recreated in this condition. In the other two conditions, discrepancies between the subject's judgment and that of his peers were consistently associated with the introduction of the asymmetric matrix.¹ In the differing-priorities condition, the same asymmetry was present for the potential dissenter and the majority, but he could postulate differences in the priority that he and his peers had given to this asymmetry in making their judgments; the subject could, moreover, anticipate the possibility of a similar attribution by his peers. In the differing-payoff condition the subject could attribute disagreements to differing effects of symmetric and asymmetric payoffs, and he could expect his peers to do likewise.

Control conditions. A total of 40 control subjects, 20 males and 20 females, judged the relative lengths of the pairs of tones during two group administrations. Subjects were told of a prospective perception experiment for which

TABLE 2

Illustration of Symmetric and Asymmetric Matrices

Subject's response	Points scored for correct response	
	Tone 1	Tone 2
(a) Symmetric payoff matrix		
Tone 1	10	0
Tone 2	0	10
(b) Asymmetric payoff matrix		
Tone 1	10	0
Tone 2	0	100

¹ In both the differing-payoffs and differing-priorities conditions, the asymmetric payoff matrix (favoring the Tone 2 guess) was introduced on one noncritical trial (Trial 16) for which Tone 2 was the longer of the two presented. The confederates guessed correctly on this trial as did the subject. This procedure was designed to prevent subjects from hypothesizing that the response seemingly favored by the asymmetry of payoffs would never be the correct one.

they were serving as pretest subjects. They were then instructed to write the number 1 or 2 on an answer form after each pair of tones had been presented. This condition provided a baseline "error" rate to which the conformity rates in the three experimental conditions could be compared.

CONFIDENCE RATINGS AND CONCLUDING PROCEDURES

When the last trial was completed, confidence-rating forms were distributed. They required each subject to write a percentage between 0% and 100% to indicate how certain he was that he got (a) all 24 trials correct, (b) at least 22 trials correct, (c) at least 20 trials correct, and (d) at least 18 correct.

Results

CONFORMITY DATA

The data testing the principal experimental predictions were provided by the seven critical conformity trials. Before attending to the relevant data, however, it is worth noting that subjects in the three experimental conditions made *no* "errors" on the 17 noncritical trials; that is, no subject ever dissented from a correct group consensus.

Table 4 presents the basic data for our study. It is immediately apparent that conformity pressures were created in the three experimental conditions because each of these conditions produced more errors on the critical trials than did the control condition. It is also evident that these three different attribution conditions produced differing rates of conformity. As anticipated, the highest conformity rate, and hence the least dissent, occurred in the Asch condition (26%); lower rates were obtained in the differing-priorities condition (18%) and in the differing-payoffs condition (10%).

TABLE 4

Conformity Data for Critical Trials

Statistic	Condition			
	Asch	Differing priorities	Differing payoffs	Control
Total no. errors ^a	72	50	27	10
% errors/possible errors	25.7	17.9	9.6	3.6
No. subjects making at least one error	27	21	18	9
Mean no. errors per conforming subject	2.67	2.38	1.50	1.11 ^b
Mean no. errors, all subjects	1.80	1.25	.68	.25

Note. For each condition, $n = 40$.

^a Total no. possible = 280.

^b In the control condition, this rate simply refers to mean number of errors made by the nine subjects who made one error in judging the critical trial stimuli.

Contrast analyses reveal the extent to which these results confirmed experimental predictions. The mean number of critical "errors" made by subjects in the Asch condition exceeded the corresponding means for the other two conditions in which disagreement or dissent could be attributed to differences in payoffs or differences in priorities, $F(1, 108) = 8.12, p < .01$. The more specific prediction concerning the amount of conformity and dissent in the three conditions was also confirmed.² The relevant linear contrast, assigning weights of +1, 0, and -1, respectively, to the Asch, differing-priorities, and differing-payoffs conditions, yielded a clearly significant result, $F(1, 108) = 11.36, p < .01$, with a negligible residual. More detailed examination of the data shows that the differences in overall conformity rates reflected differences both in the number of conformers and in the frequency of their yielding.

The control condition produced eight subjects who made one error and one who made two errors on the critical stimuli. Although this 3.6% error rate was much lower than the conformity rate obtained in the experimental conditions, it is higher than one might wish or expect in a conceptual replication of the Asch phenomenon. Some of these errors may have occurred because of the large group setting that produced some unavoidable noise and a potential for confusion and distraction. It is evident, however, that the discrimination task required to produce modest conformity rates in ex-

² The two contrasts reported are not orthogonal and do not provide two independent tests of the hypothesis concerning attribution processes and conformity which underlies the present study. Rather, the second is a more specific test of the reasoning that prompted the first. A simple contrast of the differing-payoffs and differing-priorities condition is orthogonal to those reported and is statistically significant, $F(1, 76) = 3.96, p = .05$. This contrast, however, is confounded by the potential effect of the difference in payoffs facing subjects because the differing-priorities condition offered a potential reward of 100 points if the conforming response proved correct and the differing-payoffs condition offered a potential reward of only 10 points. Subsequent to the completion of the experiment reported here, the present investigators tested an additional control group of 17 subjects. These subjects faced the same asymmetric payoff matrix as differing subjects but wrote their judgments privately without exposure to erring confederates. The result in this control condition was an error rate of 5.9% on the "critical" trials, which compared with a 3.6% rate in the original control condition that had provided no asymmetric payoffs. It should be emphasized that any such effect of payoffs in the original experiment acts *against* the prediction tested in the first contrast reported above, and it is neutralized by the weights assigned in the second contrast.

TABLE 5

Confidence Ratings of Consistent Dissenters

Rating	Condition			
	Asch (<i>n</i> = 13)	Differing priorities (<i>n</i> = 19)	Differing payoffs (<i>n</i> = 22)	Control (<i>n</i> = 31)
Specified no. correct				
24	54.2	73.9	84.8	86.6
22 or more	65.4	80.3	94.5	93.4
20 or more	80.0	87.1	97.7	96.3
18 or more	91.5	93.9	99.1	98.9
Combined index Sum of confidence ratings	291.2	335.2	376.1	375.2

Note. Each subject wrote a percentage between 0% and 100% to rate his confidence that he had made the specified number of correct judgments on the 24 trials.

perimental conditions was more difficult than the one that Asch had used.

CONFIDENCE RATINGS

Postexperimental confidence ratings completed by subjects revealed further effects of the attribution manipulations (Table 5). The 13 consistent dissenters in the Asch condition reported that they were 54.2% confident about guessing correctly on all 24 trials and only 80% confident about guessing correctly on as many as 20 trials. As anticipated, the consistent dissenters in the differing-priorities and differing-influences conditions expressed greater confidence in their judgments.³

When a combined confidence index is used to contrast the Asch dissenters with the dissenters in the other two conditions, a clearly significant *F* value results, $F(1, 51) = 7.94, p < .01$. The linear trend of increasing confidence for dissenters from Asch to differing-priorities to differing-payoffs conditions also is significant, $F(1, 51) = 11.42, p < .01$. The confidence of the 22 consistent dissenters who could attribute disagreements to differing payoffs is particularly striking. These dissenters, in fact, were as confident about their responses as

were the 31 control group subjects whose errorless records had been achieved in the absence of any group pressures.

*Discussion*CONFORMITY PRESSURES AND
ATTRIBUTION PROCESSES

An effort to appreciate more thoroughly the significance of the Asch phenomenon led initially to close examination of the attribution crisis faced by Asch's subjects and ultimately to a more general hypothesis concerning the role of attribution processes in mediating conformity and dissent. In support of this analysis, experimental conditions were designed that manipulated the ability of potential dissenters both to account for their disagreements with their peers and to assume that satisfactory interpretations of their dissent would be made by their peers. As predicted, frequency of dissent and confidence of dissenters increased to the extent that the relevant experimental conditions offered satisfactory resolutions to these attributional problems.

We have contended that the Asch situation created unparalleled conformity pressures because of the attribution crisis it precipitated for the subject. We have furthermore argued that this crisis arose primarily because of the completely unambiguous judgment task. At the same time, however, we have noted that higher absolute rates of conformity than those reported by Asch have almost invariably resulted from the introduction of ambiguous, difficult, or subjective judgment tasks (see the review by Allen, 1965, pp. 167-168). The reader is apt to be confused by this apparent paradox unless care is taken to distinguish between *rate* of conformity and *pressures* to conformity.

A conformity rate reflects the resultant of two opposing forces. The first force is pressure to conformity; it is this force that has been the central concern of the attributional analysis presented in this article. The other force is the pressure to remain independent, a *restraining* force that thus far has received little attention. As judgments become more difficult, ambiguous, or subjective, such pressures to independence are correspondingly reduced. The Asch subject who conforms must pay a heavy price. He must privately concede either that he is a weakling who has yielded to an objectively incorrect majority (in which case he has yielded to his inferiors) or that he cannot make simple judg-

³ The exclusion of conformers in these comparisons of confidence ratings raises a potential problem of interpretation. The conformers were apt to be the very subjects whose confidence in their initial impressions was most shaken by the majority's disagreement; furthermore, the incidence of conformity, and hence the exclusion of subjects, was unequal in the three experimental conditions. It should be obvious, however, that this potential artifact acted against the experimental predictions that were confirmed because the conditions for which least confident dissent was predicted were those conditions from which the greatest number of conformers were excluded.

ments about reality and, moreover, cannot even tell whether a judgment is easy or difficult. With more typical judgment tasks, which are complex and subjective, the costs that restrain conformity are apt to be more modest. The conformist may feel that he has avoided pointless and potentially acrimonious confrontation on an issue that has no simple correct answer, thus displaying tact or good manners rather than a revelation of personal weakness. At most he is forced to acknowledge privately that his own sophistication, good taste, or expertise with regard to some isolated issues or judgments may be unequal to that of the majority. The Asch situation thus produces comparatively low rates of conformity, *in spite of* enormously potent pressures to conformity, because it generates equally potent forces on the subject to remain independent. It is this conflict between opposing forces that, in part, leads to the discomfort and uncertainty among subjects Asch so compellingly describes.

An implication of the foregoing analysis should be obvious. The magnitude of conformity pressures can be inferred from conformity rates only to the extent that restraining forces remain constant. Our research strategy, in fact, was partially dictated by this consideration: In order to assess the impact of attribution processes on conformity pressures, it was necessary to design attribution manipulations that held constant the judgment task and other factors which might have influenced those pressures restraining conformity.

EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL ATTRIBUTIONS

Data from the present experiment support some speculations, offered earlier, about the relative impact of external versus internal (or situational versus dispositional) explanations for dissent. As predicted, subjects seemed most completely liberated from group pressures when dissenter and majority alike could attribute the lack of accord to differences between those external forces or potential payoffs influencing the dissenter and those affecting the majority. When such external factors were identical for the dissenter and majority in an experimental condition, the impact of the group was increased somewhat, but still was only moderate. To account for disparity in judgments, the subject in this condition could postulate that he had assigned a lower priority than his peers to the inducements of the payoff matrix; he furthermore could anticipate that they would make a similar

attribution concerning his dissent. We suspect that such dispositional attributions regarding dissent are almost always less satisfying and more threatening for the subjects than situational attributions. No dissenter, however, experienced attribution problems as perplexing and threatening as those of the Asch subject. In his attempt to account for disagreement and to anticipate the attributions of his peers, he could not detect any relevant situational factors and he could postulate only the dispositional differences involving the most basic perceptual abilities.

The fact that a higher conformity rate was obtained in the Asch situation than in the differing-priorities condition merits further emphasis. While the potential reward for dissent was equal in both conditions (10 points), the potential reward for conformity was 10 times as great in the differing-priorities condition as in the Asch condition (100 versus 10 points). Thus the obtained difference in conformity rates represented an effect of attribution processes sufficient to overcome any simple effect of payoff on choice that might have occurred (see Footnote 2).

THE PUBLIC-PRIVATE DICHOTOMY

Virtually all discussions of social influence have distinguished between public compliance or conformity and private shifts in judgment or belief (notably Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; Kelman, 1958). In the present article this distinction prompted the use of "confidence measures" in addition to the usual indexes of public conformity or dissent. This distinction also was evident in the speculation that one's private judgments and confidence depend on one's own ability to account for discrepancies in judgment while one's public responses depend, in large measure, on one's expectancies concerning the attributions that will be made by one's peers.

From the viewpoint of attribution theory, however, the public-private dichotomy may be less important than the problem of "correspondent inference" (cf. Jones & Davis, 1965). Under some circumstances the potential dissenter may assume that the public responses of his peers do not correspond to their private judgments. He similarly can speculate about whether his peers will assume correspondence between his own public and private response. Obviously, the subject is most freed of conformity pressure when he can assume that relevant payoff considerations have led to a discrepancy between the public and private responses of his

peers. There are also some situations, however, in which he may be more willing to express dissent because he expects his peers to assume that his public opposition masks a private assent to their views.

It is possible to interpret the results of the present study in terms of an attribution analysis that emphasizes the perceived correspondence between public and private judgment. Subjects in both the differing-payoffs and differing-priorities condition (but not the Asch condition) were free to assume that the confederates' overt responses on critical trials were foolhardy gambles prompted by the attractive "odds" offered by the asymmetric matrix and, accordingly, that these public guesses did not correspond to private impressions. In the differing-payoffs condition, the subjects could further anticipate that their own dissent would be attributed by their peers to the absence of such attractive odds. In the differing-priorities condition, the subject was forced to attribute the disagreement in public responses to some dispositional difference between himself and his peers and to assume that his peers would do likewise; but this postulated difference could involve one's fondness for "playing long shots," a particular individual difference that the dissenter may be perfectly willing to recognize and have recognized by others.

There is no way to determine whether subjects in the present experiment solved their attribution problems by resorting to the distinction between public behaviors and private judgments, but the thrust of the general argument in this article does not demand such a determination. The potential dissenter in society consistently faces the dilemma of interpreting behavior and anticipating the interpretations of others. Sometimes he may identify or postulate factors that involve distortion of private judgment; sometimes his explanations may involve possible discrepancies between public and private judgment; at still other times, he may entertain both possibilities or fail to consider the dichotomy. Whatever the specifics of his attempt to resolve attributional problems, his success or failure may determine his susceptibility to group pressures in the manner that has been outlined.

RESEARCH STRATEGY

Investigators, mindful of space restrictions in our leading journals, rarely discuss the general strategy that underlies their particular studies. However, McGuire's (1973) provocative challenge to the

objectives, rationale, and tactics of contemporary research in social psychology prompts such a discussion concerning the present study. The intent of our demonstration and the spirit of our report were polemic. We first sought to persuade the reader that the Asch experiments showed not the tyranny of the group over the individual, but the consequence of unresolved and unresolvable problems of interpersonal perception and attribution. We attempted next to discuss attribution problems and paradigmatic solutions that characterize everyday confrontations between the dissenter and his peers and, finally, to demonstrate laboratory analogies to these confrontations.

McGuire (1973) raises some searching questions about the criterion of *nonobviousness*, which has become a watchword for social psychologists. The present study, perhaps, brings this issue into focus. We hoped that our demonstrations might be non-obvious and thought provoking for the reader who, prior to conceptual analysis and discussion, had failed to appreciate the critical role of attributional processes in the Asch situation and in other conformity situations. But we were under no illusion that our *general* contention about the relationship between attribution processes and conformity was counterintuitive. Certainly one could suggest attribution manipulations that could hardly fail to influence conformity rates and, accordingly, could not challenge the reader to reassess his understanding of conformity phenomena or of previous research. Suppose, for instance, that confederates, but not the target subject, wore semiopaque glasses in the Asch situation. Or suppose that the subject was forewarned of possible collusion between his fellow participants and the experimenter, or was allowed to overhear his peers plotting to punish the experimenter for some past affront to their dignity or intelligence. Such conditions obviously would permit the subject to interpret apparent disagreements in judgment, would satisfy his apprehension concerning his peers' interpretation of his dissent, and almost certainly would eliminate all conformity.

In a sense, therefore, the present investigators have failed if they merely have used subtle and complicated manipulations to prove a general contention that, on reflection, could be accepted without documentation. We have succeeded only to the extent that our readers' broader views about social influence have been changed by our arguments and our demonstration. More important, we will have succeeded only if we prompt future

investigators to raise different questions, to use different procedures, or to worry about different moderators in their attempts to understand conformity and dissent in the Asch situation and in our society. This brief discussion of research strategy and tactics makes apparent our ultimate debt to Asch. For his conformity studies provided the classic model of research that tested no non-obvious hypotheses yet, nevertheless, profoundly challenged our view of social man and shaped our research.

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